

Making Modernities



*Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, Brochure cover for '14 Bauhaus Books', 1929 (www.artstore.com)
(Figure 1)*

The Bauhaus School was founded by Walter Gropius in 1919 in Weimar, Germany. It later moved to Dessau in 1925, and then finally Berlin in 1932, before being shut down by the National Socialist regime due to the left-wing style modernist ideologies it expressed through work. The school was based on modern and revolutionary teaching principles that incorporated many different forms of Art and Design ranging from Architecture and Fine Art to Graphic Design and Typography. The reason I have chosen an image from this period of design is because I feel personally that the Bauhaus was the most influential school of the 20th century in this field, and had a knock on effect which helped form future movements and still has a huge relevance today. Walter Gropius described the aims of the Bauhaus, "... to educate men and women to understand the world they live in and to invent and create forms symbolising that world".¹

The image I have chosen (Fig. 1) is a great example to explain some of the ideologies that are associated with the Bauhaus. Firstly, there was a growing relationship between art and industry at this time, and I think that the work coming from Bauhaus recognised that at some point there would need to be a connection between the two. I understand that it was probably an exciting time, not just for artists and designers, but for anyone; due to the new technologies that were rapidly being evolved (for instance, photography and early photo-manipulation used in this image). There was a distinct aim towards the future, and this view seemed to be a catalyst that pushed movements in art and design forward to produce these sort of works. New technologies were the key element in a lot of designs and the idea of the clean-cut mechanistic look to work was apparent. The aesthetics were driven by the functionality of the item/design, and this was a very new approach since past works had been generally driven by pleasure and/or decoration. The idea that sometimes only the minimum was needed to make something successful if the conditions and objectives were met. As A. Greenberg explains, "Both the Dada movement and the Bauhaus were concerned with creating new values for a democratic republic, and with making a concern for values a significant part of life for every German."² This is the idea that the art and design that was produced was more than just for decoration, and that it could and would mean more; it would hold values that are needed within everyday life

and could be relevant to everyone in society. I do feel however, that to fully understand the entire collection of ideas that the Bauhaus revolutionised, the context in which the whole modernist movement was surrounded, needs to be brought into perspective.

World War One had raged through Europe for 4 years, and (as a recently proclaimed Republic) Germany was forced to succumb to defeat and take blame for the entire war; a war she had not in fact started. It was a time where machines and the modern world were inevitably looked upon with a certain amount of scorn, as they had brought a new age of modern warfare to the battlefield with epic and devastating proportions never seen before. Although it had opened up the world to a new era, in which the question; 'are machines going to replace man?' was first asked. The mechanistic world was obviously not going to go away; for the developed countries of the world it was going to advance rapidly within art, design and society itself. Looking back through art from before this period it is easy to see that the more modern look to work had started to take form with the Post-Impressionist, Futurist and Dada movements, and also the cubist movement pioneered by Picasso and Braque. Looking at 'The Musicians Table' (Fig. 2) elements of the more modern thinking are starting to emerge. For example, the painting has a different means of expression, in that it is more representative of its subject through an idea, rather than being a mere copy of what the artist saw. The abstracting of form in a very inhuman, almost mechanised way is a direct reference to the modernity theme in society during these times. It almost looks like Braque was trying to simplify the form itself by only using a series of shapes, which appear to form a loose grid, albeit in a shattered looking manner.

These themes can be translated through other forms of art and design, and can be seen even in the cover for '14 Bauhaus Books' by Lazlo Maholy-Nagy (Fig. 1). For example, the way that the text is set is breaking some of the 'rules' that typographers and designers had used in the past. There is a grid system used to bring order, but in places it seems broken, similar to the work by the cubists. The balance of the composition, however, seems to be extremely successful and I think this seems to relate back to the idea of functionality directly driving the design. The whole composition is revolutionary in the way that it simply leaves 'white space' and makes no attempt to glorify or decorate the content - thus not distracting the reader. The good design does this itself, and this is what I think is key. The same theories can be derived from the typefaces used; the clean-cut sans-serif fonts compliment the ideas of an easier to produce piece, with a focus on the content rather than decorating the design itself. Although the "first sans-serif font appeared in 1816 in a type sample book by William Caslon"³ it wasn't until early modernism that they really was used in the way that we see here. The typefaces without serif's could be seen as designs without decoration within themselves.

There are many other works that derived from the Bauhaus that demonstrate similar revolutionary traits as the ones already mentioned. Firstly, there was other examples of good graphic design coming out of the school in this period. For instance, Figure 3 shows a visiting card design, that was in fact produced by an unknown student. It follows a clear resemblance to some of the designs discussed already - specifically; using sans-serif text, simple linear type setting with a mechanised look. Also, in Figure 4, a poster designed by Herbert Bayer for a Kandinsky exhibition, also following an identical colour scheme to most Bauhaus designs, and a normal modern type setting option. The fact that these two designs came from a student and a lecturer shows that the whole thought process taught there was universal, and more of a movement. Herbert Bayer, himself, studied at the



Georges Braque, 'The Musicians Table'
1913 (www.artstor.com)
(Figure 2)

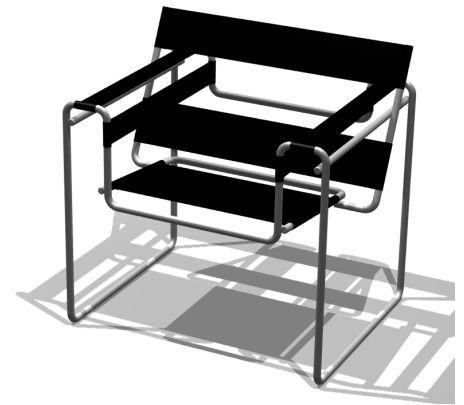


Unknown Artist, 'Visiting card for Franz Kopp Fagus-Werk' 1925
(www.artstor.com)
(Figure 3)



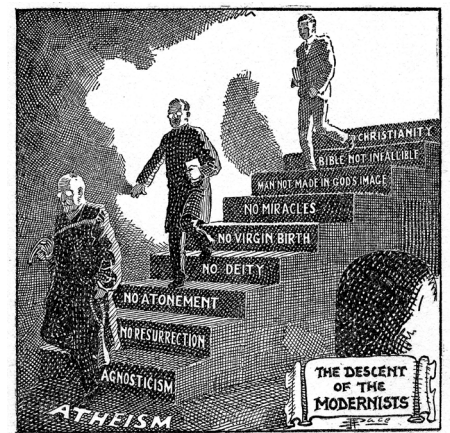
Bayer, H. 'Kandinsky Exhibition Poster'
1926 (<http://www.britannica.com>)
(Figure 4)

Bauhaus for four years before being appointed director of Printing and advertising. Secondly, the product design, in particular the more famous, Marcel Breuer's, 'Wassily Chair' (Fig. 5) (named after Wassily Kandinsky). The idea that only the bare minimum is needed for a successful design is expressed no better than here; only the metal structure with a small amount of fabric/rubber is needed to fulfill the functions of a chair - balance as a design and more obviously with gravity is met and the design went on to be one of the most influential pieces of 3D-design. This was a revolutionary design at this point in time due to older designs, again, being highly decorative and almost trying to hide their one and only real function. All of these factors are pushing for a more modern way of thinking and can be seen within other mediums also, such as painting, film and also within the architectural design.



Breuer, M. 'Wassily Chair' 1925-26
(www.movemodern.com)
(Figure 5)

The Bauhaus school in Dessau is a good focus point for the architecture since it was designed purely for use as the Bauhaus school in 1925 by Walter Gropius. He "consistently separated the parts of the Bauhaus building according to their functions and designed each differently."⁴ This gave every section a character of its own, however they all had one thing in common in that they were remarkably similar in some ways to some of the designs that were produced within the school. Most obvious is the modern look to the buildings, with very linear but almost refreshing directions and angles. Their colour palette used is limited also; on the exterior there is only 3 colours used: white, grey and a small amount of red on the doorways (this is the exact same colour scheme used within a lot of the printed work in Bauhaus also). The interior of the Bauhaus is similar, and only uses a small amount of pale colour in certain areas and stairwells. The building where the workshops were situated is three floors high, with nothing but clear glass surrounding them - with no obvious ceiling or floors. The whole school carries an idea of transparency and I think that this is a theme that not only follows every section of Bauhaus design and art, but also society and the newer, modern way of thinking at the time.



Pace, E. J. 'The Descent of the Modernists'
1922 (witcombe.sbc.edu)
(Figure 6)

I think that there are more than one reason as to why the sorts of designs produced in the Bauhaus had never appeared before this point, and they all firmly reside within the changes of society. Before the industrialisation, religion had contributed a lot towards politics, society and was the main source of many elements that built up a culture. Books, academic material and art itself was usually linked to the church in some way (for instance, one of the first main achievements in printing was Gutenberg's Bible; from the 1490's). However, after industrialisation a new age of enlightenment entailed and I think people and society based most of it's beliefs in the human race and what we had achieved to that point (in science etc.); thus starting the inevitable decrease in church power. There was a 'modernism' within the church also, as seen in the cartoon image by E. J. Pace (Fig. 6), and it was deemed that modernism was the inevitable descent from Christianity into Atheism. I can imagine that although this was a different entity of 'modernism', that people at this time (specifically church followers) could and probably would have confused or linked all forms of modernism. I also think it worth noting that after looking through some press comments from the era, there was an element of confusion to the ideas implemented within the Bauhaus due to the normal ideologies already maintained in society. Walter Gropius says, "The critics of the Bauhaus showed a tendency, typical of the period, to narrow down the comprehensive Bauhaus program in order to make it fit in with one of the many different ideologies then current".⁵ It seems that some people found it hard to keep an open mind about the newer ideas shown within the school, despite the program reputation.

These factors could have arisen before, I think, within other modern, forward thinking movements similar to the school; specifically the Dada and Futurist movements. Dada was a movement that mainly thrived in France, Switzerland and Germany between 1916 and 1920, and based itself upon the idea of deliberate irrationality, rejection of certain laws and the creation of anti-aesthetic designs. Futurism, an Italian movement was founded by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and was launched when his Futurist Manifesto was published for the first time in 1909. Marinetti showed his hate for everything from the past, and referenced that the futurists wanted no part of the past and were strong enough to move into the future. The revolutionary ideas behind these two movements can be compared to that of the Bauhaus. They are all probably spurred on partially by the new enlightenment thinking, and then influenced by events such as World War I. Within the actual work, I do see some contrasts. For example, in Marius de Zayas's work (Fig. 7) the illustration with the use and placement of text is quite revolutionary, however it is predominantly hand-drawn and doesn't appear to have the mechanised accurate look that the work from Bauhaus does. Similarly with some of Marinetti's early work (Fig. 8), the use of text is, at this time remarkable, yet is still very hand-rendered and not particularly neat. There is a move towards a simplified layout without decoration, yet the clean-cut look of Bauhaus print seems rather different. I think that the ideologies behind these movements did not differ hugely but that machine-look and more concise looking design was being implemented at the Bauhaus.

The work that the school produced can be seen as the beginning of the Modernism era within Graphic design and I think that it influenced future movements also. For instance, the Swiss modernism movements from the 50's and 60's can be heavily linked to the work produced in the 1920's, in Dessau, specifically. The type designs explored by people such as Herbert Bayer at the school, in creating a universal type certainly would have had some influence on later type designers such as Wim Crouwel. The usage of early grotesk fonts within the Bauhaus paved the way for the design of the 50's typeface 'Neue Haas Grotesk', to be renamed 'Helvetica' - known as the most influential type of the last 50 years due to its 'neutral' look. Following the original ideologies laid down in the 20's, many designers have taken the clean looking approach to type design for readability options and less cluttered aesthetics.

For me personally, looking back at not only the other art movements at this time, but society as a whole I would have to agree that the radical changes that took place seemed to happen between the World Wars (1918-1939). It is almost as though there were social, political and morale barriers that were broken during this time, and the war beforehand. I think that with the gift of hindsight we can look upon these movements as whole sections of history, whereas the people that were around at the time were working within an evolving world, which was possibly exciting, radical and more open than ever. I do think that the new world would have been daunting and scary, after what many had experienced in the First World War but that may have been why people wanted the change. The fact that people were able to push towards the future with sciences, art and all forms of society can be seen as quite refreshing and I think this is portrayed in the work produced. The openness, and excitement of the work, however simple it seems at first is apparent to me. I think that a lot of the original ideas and theories explored at the time are still rather valid today.



Marius de Zayas, 1913
(www.artstor.com)
(Figure 7)



Marinetti Poster, 1912
(seanbanner.wordpress.com)
(Figure 8)

References:

¹ Bartram. A. (2004) Bauhaus, Modernism and the Illustrated Book. London: The British Library.

² Greenberg. A. C. (1979). Artists and Revolution: Dada and the Bauhaus, 1917-1925. Michigan: University Microfilms International.

³ Frutiger. A. (2004). Font Feature: The History of Linear, Sans-Serif Typefaces. Retrieved 17/12/09 from '<http://www.linotype.com/>'

⁴ Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau, 'The Bauhaus Building by Walter Gropius.' Retrieved 19/12/09 from '<http://www.bauhaus-dessau.de/>'

⁵ Bauhaus, 1919-1928. Edited by Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, Ise Gropius. (1959) -Branford, Boston.